

A Sacred Presence: Bear Encounters in Outdoor Education

by Julian Norris

There are moments in outdoor education that can only be described as magical. These are times when the wider world mirrors our human stories with an uncanny synchronicity, as if choreographed by an unseen hand. Often the only thing we can really do is try and stay out of the way. In my own work, the footsteps moving through such magical moments have very often belonged to the bear.

It is early evening in the Rockies. It has been a long day. Sam, a street-hardened and emotionally inaccessible teen from Vancouver, is missing. Following his tracks out of the valley, I catch up to him around sunset. Wordlessly, I sit down by the side of the trail, and to my surprise he joins me. We watch the sun descend in silence, and as the darkness falls, we see the form of a grizzly bear emerge onto the trail. It glances at us, turns, and disappears noiselessly into the forest. We sit in heightened silence, a little more awake, a little more aware and a little more alive. "Well, I'm heading back to camp," I say, rising and speaking for the first time. "Me too," says Sam, shouldering his pack. And as we walk back, Sam speaks about the teen that had been jibing him mercilessly for two days. "I was ready to lay into him," says Sam, "but I'm still on probation and it would just make things worse. So I figured I'd just walk away from it." We discussed the challenges of the 1,000-kilometre walk home, the motivating wisdom behind his decision, and the viability of options other than fight or flight. He began to open his heart, and my heart opened in response. And I gave thanks to the bear, whose wild presence had opened a door to deep dialogue and transformation, and touched the life of a wild young man forever.

I live in the territory of the Nakoda people, where the words for "bear" translate as "the Great One," "all-knowing Grandfather," "the Great Mother" — honorific terms revealing a deep respect and reverence. Such respect is echoed in the traditional lifeways of Original

Peoples around the world and throughout history. From the Paleolithic cave bear burial sites in Europe that may be the earliest archeological evidence of the human spiritual impulse, to the newly designated Great Bear Rainforest protected area in British Columbia, the bear has deeply impacted and perhaps even shaped the consciousness of every culture that has encountered her.

Andy was a young man who came to live with me after a desperate home situation left him living on the streets. Quick to anger and understandably defensive, he found silence disturbing. Even a short pause in a conversation would leave him trying to fill it. The natural world, already an alien place, seemed empty, and his efforts to fill it with sound and action only made it more so. We began to work on meditation and, as it has for many angry young men, the practice of martial arts offered a doorway to the interior world. He worked hard, determined to become an invincible warrior. One practice involved sitting still by a lake for a period of time and letting his mind become as still as the lake. One day, some 40 minutes after he had departed for his place, he came running back. His hair literally standing up in the air, he gasped, "There's a . . . a . . . a . . .". "A bear?" I asked. He nodded wide-eyed. And so there was. The largest black bear I had ever seen in the area.

Later he shared his story. For the first time, he said, the practice had actually worked. Instead of being tormented by his thoughts, he found himself slipping into a place of stillness. He opened his eyes what seemed to him moments later to see the bear lying down calmly not six feet away from him. For a moment it seemed perfectly normal. Then he bolted . . .

Somehow this encounter changed Andy. Some of his fear and anger left him, to be filled with a calm patience. His fierce sense of protectiveness began to mature into a deeper compassion,

eventually extending even to those who had violated his trust. It was as if in encountering the bear, he had encountered his own wild self, and to his surprise, it was gentle, wise and powerful. A decade on he lives a good life, increasingly embodying those qualities. Once again I found myself giving thanks to the bear.

Our encounters with bears are shaped by a deep ancestral and cultural patterning. We have projected some of our deepest feelings onto the bear. It has variously been idealized as the most powerful warrior, the perfect mother, the wisest being, the most skilful healer, the guardian of the generative source of nature's very abundance. And at the same time one need only look at any newspaper after a bear attack to see how we continue to project some of our deepest fears. This archetypal quality is unlikely to go away any time soon, and it can work a special magic on young people who have yet to discover their genuinely wild souls and who remain stuck in the destructive behaviours of an immature expression of wildness. The living presence of bears — especially when we are alone in wild places — can undermine the fragile bravado of our everyday personality, and in some precious cases, crack open the doorway to transformation. Such encounters have an almost initiatory quality; they can profoundly alter our very way of being in the world.

But just as the bear stalks the fearful reaches of our imaginations, so too can she bring growth and healing — especially if we as educators are willing to walk into the spaces that her presence can open, whether literally in the wilderness or in the world of dreams and imagination.

I was in a circle with 50 Tamil children from a fishing village in southern India. This particular village, like so many others, had been recently devastated by the Asian tsunami. The ocean — the source of life and abundance and a mother to the people — had become a source of death, destruction and terror. As we sat together in the grounds of the village temple, I invited the



children to go on a journey, traveling on the sound of my flute, to a land under the sea. Here it might even be possible, I suggested, to encounter and converse with the powers of the natural world.

The children loved the activity, with many describing fantastic journeys through magical landscapes and wondrous encounters with all manner of beings. One little girl caught my attention with the serious look on her face as she patiently waited to share her experience. Yes, she had been to a wonderful land under the sea she said. And did she meet anyone there I asked. "Karadi" she replied. The bear. And the bear had spoken to her. He told her to be strong and not to be afraid. And he had given her a dance. And then she stood, and swaying back and forth, paws held before her, she danced a dance of power, strength and determination that stunned and humbled all of us watching. It was as if we were momentarily in the living presence of the Sacred Other, of all that the bear embodied and more. The activity was transformed into a genuine healing encounter, and once again, I found myself giving thanks to the bear as her footsteps danced through the hearts of the children.

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